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ABSTRACT

An innovative approach to facilitate student mastery of Spanish linguistic structures requiring manipulation of the direct object is described in this article. The method, derived originally from William Bull's "Spanish for Teachers," also enables students to apply the transformational method to sentences containing nominalized adjectives, demonstratives, and possessives. According to the author, the key feature of Bull's method is that the facts to be learned are distributed in smaller and more manageable steps in a more efficient and satisfying way. (RL)

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SPANISH

# TEACHING SPANISH DIRECT OBJECT PRONOUNS

Raymond Moody

Teaching direct object pronouns isn't an overly difficult task in comparison with some of the other points of Spanish grammar we want our students to learn. As traditionally organized and taught, direct and indirect objects have required a lot of time and practice. A new organization and approach can reduce the amount of time we must invest and produce higher student achievement faster. This article describes precise an- specific details of a very simple procedure that has produced surprising improvements in students's ability to handle direct object pronoun forms and position.

## A Capsule View

Pronouns can be effectively taught by these basic steps: (1) Drop the direct object noun of an infinitive and attach what,s left, the article, to the infinitive (Yo voy a comprar la casa Yo voy a comprarla). (2) Drop the direct object of a conjugated form and place the article in front of the verb (Yo compro la casa Yo la compro). The principle of noun omission and this sequence for presenting the major features get amazing results. In addition, the concepts involved have some exciting implications that extend to nominalized adjectives, demonstratives, and possessives, and reduce their apparent complexity to one single process. the primary focus is upon third-person forms, but nouns with possessives and demonstratives, personal direct objects, and first- and second-person forms are also considered.

The original ideas come from William Bull and are outlined in a somewhat obscure fashion in his Spanish for Teachers (N.Y., Ronald Press, 1964, Chapter 19, especially pp. 248-9). While the entire book is unusually difficult reading, it contains, for the tenacious professional, many intriguing concepts that not only describe Spanish more accurately but make our teaching more effective and easy.

## Preliminaries

The first task is to state in fairly exact terms what we want to teach or, more precisely, what our students will do to prove they have learned what we want them to learn. Let us assume a single objective: "The students will transform statements with direct object nouns to statements without direct object nouns." We can further divide this goal into two sub-objectives by specifying two pronoun positions: post-verb position (pronouns with infinitives) and pre-verb position (pronouns with conjugated forms).

These statements describing the learning goal serve two very useful functions. They tell us first what the final exam will look like. Second, they describe the kind of practice our students need in order to

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prepare for the exam. They will be rewriting sentences and/or transforming sentences orally from ones with direct object nouns to ones with direct object pronouns.

Most effective learning takes place when the students can focus on one new element at a time. This means that before we begin we must make sure that the only new material will be the manipulation of direct objects. Thus, the students must have considerable proficiency with forms they will see (sentences with subject, verb, and direct object) as well as with vocabulary, both in terms of the Spanish words appearing in examples and any technical labels the teacher may wish to use in presenting the concepts (e.g., "noun," "direct object," "pronoun," "article"). If these preconditions are not met, it would be wise to provide appropriate training well in advance. By limiting the treatment to one new element at a time, the teacher can insure that some unexpected unknown does not distract the students from the major concept at hand.

The basic learning principle assumed here is that students learn fastest and easiest and perform best when they understand what they are supposed to do before they are required to do it. Further, learning seems to be more efficient when new knowledge is carefully anchored to old. The instructional sequence begins, therefore, with what the students already know, moves to the concept, and then continues through the practice. My favorite approach--a modified "discovery" approach--is to present the students with a problem and then to lead them to the solution and the concept to be learned by a question-answer technique. In the following presentation, each step is numbered, answers to questions appear in parentheses, and explanatory comments are in brackets.

## The Presentation

Taking advantage of the students' long-developed ability to read and to rely on what they can see as cues to learning, one can begin with four key sentences such as these on the board:

Voy a comer la fruta.
Voy a comer las frutas.
Voy a comer los plátanos.
Voy a comer el plátano.

Now we are ready to get the students' attention where we want it and present the problem.

1. How do you translate this first sentence? [The purpose here is to make absolutely sure that everyone is looking in the right direction and understands the Spanish. Also we need to write the English on the board for comparison. Then we can raise the problem:]

2. What do you do when you don't want to say this noun [pointing to the only one that is there]? Suppose you have already mentioned "the fruit" and you have to talk about "the fruit" again. It would be helpful in talking about "the fruit" to find some other way of referring to "the fruit" without saying "the fruit." [Students get the impression

that having some other way of identifying "the fruit" is a good idea. Since they already know what happens in English, it can serve as the anchor for their new knowledge;] What do you do in English when you don't want to say "the fruit"? [Cross out the fruit.] You don't say "I'm going to eat the fruit" but "I'm going to eat--what?" (It.) [Write it above crossed-out the fruit. To make sure the principles are quite clear and to prepare for the contrast in Spanish, they can be summarized:]

3. English has a two-step process. First, you take out the noun and the article modifier. Second, you replace them with a substitute word, in this case it. Spanish has a simpler process that reduces the two-step procedure to one. When Spanish doesn't want to say the noun, it just doesn't say it. [Cross out fruta.] Voy a comprar la fruta becomes Voy a comprarla. Spanish drops only the noun and saves everything else. And by writing convention, Spanish hooks up the left-over article to the infinitive. The rules for writing are not to be confused with the rules for speaking. There is only one linguistic step. The first sentence now looks something like this:

Voy a comprar la ~~fruta~~.

4. What do you do when you don't want to say frutas? [Restating the principle helps drive it home:] Just leave it out, and in writing connect the left-over article to the infinitive.

5. What do you do when you don't want to say plátanos? [Cross it out, and restate the principle again.]

6. Do you expect to leave out plátano in the last sentence? (Of course!) [Cross it out.]

7. Here we have a slight change in what is left-over. Everybody knows that the definite article form el is a little irregular. All the other form begin with the letter l and have a vowel following. But this is just the reverse. At this point when you drop the noun, Spanish makes everything very regular. What do you do with las [point] to get the singular? (Drop s.)

8. Then what do you do with los [point] to get the singular? (Drop s.) Same thing. So at this point, el becomes regular and changes to lo. [Cross out el and write in lo.] Don't forget to connect it to the infinitive.

9. Summary:
   a. In English when you don't want to say the noun, you take out the noun and the article and replace them with a new word. Two steps.
   b. Spanish is easier. When you don't want to say the noun, just drop it. One step.
   c. El changes to a regular lo.
   d. In writing, the left-over article is connected to the infinitive.

Now the students understand the concept and are ready to practice. Before we discuss some of the options available, let's consider the major implications of this presentation.

## Implications

First, in regard to the principle, Spanish merely drops the noun and retains the article. It is very important to recognize that no substitution takes place. Spanish does not take out la fruta and put back in la. In fact, historically, the third-person subject pronouns (el, la, ellos, ellas), the definite article forms (el, la, los, las), and the object pronouns (lo, la, los, las) all developed from the same forms of the Latin demonstrative ille, 'that.' The article is the pronoun. This relationship can easily be demonstrated to the students by listing the subject pronouns and drawing a vertical line between the l's:

el | (lo)
el | la
el | los
el | las

The whole form on both sides of the line is the subject pronoun. The half form makes up the article, and the pronouns when lo is added. Will this slight change in form bother anybody? It shouldn't. English does the same sort of thing with the indefinite article. Nobody is going to say a and an have different meanings. An appears before words beginning with a vowel ("an apple"); a appears before words beginning with a consonant ("a car"). The forms are different but the meaning is the same. Similarly in Spanish, el appears with the noun and any modifiers (comprar el coche); lo appears when the noun and any modifiers are dropped (comprarlo). Again, the forms are different but the meaning is the same. Thus, while English uses a two-step replacement process, Spanish uses a single-step noun-dropping process.

The second implication, as Bull points out, is that the term "pronoun" must be applied here with considerable care. If we follow the dictionary definition and consider a pronoun "a word used in the place of or as a substitute for a noun," these forms are not pronouns. Defining them as "words which occupy the same place as nouns," we get somewhat closer to an accurate description.

Third, the concept of noun omission has significant implications that can speed up teaching and learning other points of grammar. Three of these are the so-called "nominalization" of adjectives, possessives, and demonstratives. When the noun is dropped from the phrase la casa verde, it changes to la verde. It is said that the adjective verde is changed into a noun, "nominalized." This kind of analysis makes it difficult to explain how el coche verde becomes el verde. Many students wonder why the article should be different if the "noun" verde is the same. Some ask if the gender of the new noun changes and then want to know when. Obviously, the article merely matches the noun that has been dropped, and nothing replaces it. Possessives work the same way:

La casa mía becomes la mía. The possessive is still an adjective modifying a noun which is omitted but which is still clear to the speaker and listener, as it must be if communication is to be complete. And similarly, the demonstrative is not changed into a noun or noun replacement when esta camisa roja becomes ésta. The added accent mark is only a spelling convention that applies when the demonstrative appears alone. (Compare esta roja and ésta.) The noun omission principle seems to apply with any kind of modifier. Any teacher recognizes that the phrase el hombre que vi ayer is composed of the definite article, a noun, and an adjective clause introduced by que. When the noun is dropped, the phrase becomes el que vi ayer. If is difficult to understand why grammarians should say that el que is now a single unit "relative pronoun." Clearly, el que does not replace anything. Instead, the noun has been omitted, leaving the article and the adjective clause intact. El que is composed of not one but at least two units. The point is that all these features do not need separate and unique explanations. Rather, the single principle of noun ommission accounts for all of them. Once the students have learned this simple principle with the direct object, they can easily extend it to these situations.

The fourth point deals with the pronoun forms. It is clear that the students do not have to learn four new third-person pronouns. Since the articles are the pronouns, the students already know three of them. Changing el to lo when it is shown to be regular is a simple learning task.

The fifth point deals with the position of the left-over article. The advantage of beginning with noun objects of infinitives is obvious. When the noun is omitted, the article-pronoun is right where it needs to be, behind the infinitive. Beginning with the conjugated form would add an additional step of shifting the left-over to pre-verb position. Using infinitives as the starting point, then, limits the learning load to one fundamental concept. Now, what kind of practice can we suggest?

## Drills

In terms of our objectives, appropriate drills are essentially of one type: dropping the noun, but they may be written or oral. A teacher emphasizing oral skills may wish to take advantage of the extra reinforcement writing provides and cover both skills. The most effective pattern drill requires the students to say the full sentence and then repeat it without the noun:

Teacher: Voy a comer la fruta. Repitan.
Students: Voy a comer la fruta.
Teacher: Cambien.
Students: Voy a comerla.

The surest place to begin is with the sentences already on the board, using the students' ability to read as a crutch, which will soon be removed. After going through the fruit and bananas, the teacher can

use orally any appropriate vocabulary item the students know. This drill usually goes so fast, I sometimes wonder why everything else can't be as easy.

For written work, the students can take home a list of sentences to rewrite without the direct object noun. It is also helpful to include at the top of the page a summary of the principle with examples for easy reference. Experience shows that three sets of ten sentences each are usually sufficient. One set a day can be corrected in class or outside by the teacher, if she has that much time. A small amount of oral work on this point can profitably be included among the class activities each day for those classes which emphasize speaking and listening skills. Finally, the most beneficial drills provide communication practice. This will be described presently.

## Next Step

After the students have practiced these simple procedures so that they make virtually no mistakes, they are ready to learn a new point to deal with objects of conjugated verbs. We need to build on what the students already know. Again begin with some sentences on the board:

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| Voy a comer la fruta. | Yo como la fruta. | (Yo la como.) |
| | Yo como las frutas. | (Yo las como.) |
| | Yo como los plátanos. | (Yo los como.) |
| | Yo como el plátano. | (Yo lo como.) |

1. What do you do when you don't want to say this noun [pointing to the noun with the infinitive]? (Drop it.) [If the students don't anticipate too much, you don't have to skip the next question:]

2. What do you do with the left-over article? (Attach to infinitive.)

3. Now look at these sentences. Are there any infinitives here? (No.) The verbs don't end in r; these are not infinitives. Conditions are different this time. Would you expect the same principle of noun dropping to apply here? (Why not?) Sure! [Cross it out.]

4. This time we don't have an infinitive but a conjugated form. Spanish does not attach left-over articles to conjugated statement verbs. If you can't put the article on behind, where can you put it? (How about in front?) Right! [Draw a circle around la, and draw an arrow from it to in front of como.]

5. Let's rewrite the sentence to make it clearer. How do you say "I eat it"? [Rewrite.]

6-9. What happens when you don't want to say frutas? [Same process again, questioning, crossing out, drawing the arrow and rewriting the new sentences.]

10. What happens when you don't want to say plátano? (Drop it.)

11. What do you do to the form of el? (Change to lo.)

12. And where do you put it? (In front of the verb.) [Rewrite.]

13. Summary:
    a. When you drop the noun object of an infinitive, you attach the remaining article to the infinitive.
    b. When you drop the noun object of a conjugated statement verb, you move the left-over article in front of the verb.

The students are again ready for practice, the same two kinds they performed earlier but with no infinitives this time. Sentences with negatives as well as positives help get the elements in the right order. (Pronouns always go in front of these verbs: negatives are not relevant to position.) After the students have demonstrated their proficiency with conjugated verbs, the teacher may wish to drill the two positions together with sentences including both kinds of verb forms so that students learn to react appropriately to each and locate the pronouns properly.

## Communication Practice

When the goals of the course include communication, that is, when the teacher expects the students to be able to use the language in a meaningful way--transmitting and receiving ideas they select themselves--pattern drills are not the final stopping place. Rather the last drill activity in each kind of exercises should include actual practice in using the new forms to communicate. A very effective device for accomplishing this end at the elementary level is personalized questions. How do these work?

Quite simply, the teacher turns the drill statements into questions, which each student is asked to answer according to his own interests and abilities. Since the point under consideration here involves converting sentences with nouns to ones with pronouns, the teacher can ask questions with nouns and require an answer with pronouns:

Teacher: ¿Va a comer las manzanas?
Student: Sí, voy a comerlas. (Or negative if he wishes.)
Teacher: ¿Trae usted los libros?
Student: No, no los traigo. (Or positive if he wishes.)

Note that these questions and answers not only require a change in the noun but a change in the verb as well. The practice assumes that the students are proficient in dealing with both elements in combination as well as separately. This kind of exercise also provides essential preparation for teaching the first- and second-person pronoun forms, as we shall see, after we cover two more details. Although this drill is somewhat contrived--the speaker would use no article unless the object has been talked about previously--it gets very close to real communication.

## Nouns with Possessives or Demonstratives

The discussion so far has focused prima rily on nouns which are accompanied by the definite article. What hap pens when the article is replaced by another form, such as a possessive or a demonstrative (la silla su silla esta silla)? These require special consideration. Ignoring the possibility that the demonstrative can stand alone, students need to learn that the modifier changes back to the article before the noun is dropped:

Queremos comprar su casa.
Queremos comprar la casa.
Queremos comprarla.

Slower students especially can benefit from drill that demands just this kind of rewriting or oral transformation procedure. Faster students may learn to omit the intermediate step with little practice. In short, students need to learn that when a non-article form is present, it changes to the article before the noun is omitted.

## Personal Direct Objects

Sentences in which the direct object is a person also need special treatment. What the students need to learn is simply that the direct object marker a also drops: Despierta a la chica becomes La despierta. Although it is a minor detail, it is significant, as I learned the hard way. My students dutifully followed the procedures they had learned and wrote La despierta a!, until they received more complete instruction. Fortunately, the point is easy and requires little effort for teaching and learning. (The a goes before the direct object person noun. When the noun falls, there is no noun for the a to precede, so the a falls too.)

These last two points are relatively less important details and can most profitable be reserved for presentation later, after the major principle--noun dropping--has been practiced. Postponing these details distributes them more evenly by treating one item at a time thus reducing the learning load to make each step more effective.

## First- and Second-Person Forms

At this point we can review in summary fashion some means for dealing with the other pronoun forms. First, the second-person formal, then the others.

The pronouns for usted and ustedes are fairly easy to handle. Although they are second-person forms, they developed from a third-person (noun modified by a possessive): vuestra merced. (That's why usted matches third-person verbs.) Hence, it is easy to derive the noun using appositives: Señora, no buscan a los chicos. Buscan a usted la mamá. The noun omission process works on the last sentence. Dropping the noun, usted, and the prepostion, it becomes La buscan.

The first-person and second intimate (tu), however, cannot be derived by dropping nouns (third-person forms) and saving what's left. The most effective alternative seems to be to show the students that these first- and second-person forms can replace the article-pronoun to indicate the different people involved: No lo creen, No me creen, No te creen, etc. The most useful drills, which require students to select appropriate forms, seem to be the question-answer type:

Teacher: ¿Él me escucha?
Student: No, él no la escucha.
Teacher: ¿Yo lo escucho (a usted)?
Student: No, (usted) no me escucha.

Again, these details can be most conveniently reserved for last, after the students have developed considerable proficiency with the preceding elements.

In summary, direct object pronouns can be presented very effectively by beginning with objects of infinitives and feminine forms. The principle which students have to learn is that, contrary to English usage which substitutes one form for another, the noun is merely dropped in Spanish. What is left over--the article--is retained and serves as the "pronoun." The next step involves showing the students that the masculine singular (el) changes its form but not its meaning.

The second phase deals with conjugated verbs. Since the students already know the principle of noun omission and the forms, the only new element is the pronoun's position. The students learn that the forms are attached to infinitives and placed before conjugated verbs.

Further, special attention needs to be focused on possessive and demonstrative replacements of the definite article as well as on the residue of sentences with a personal direct object. The order in which these two items are treated does not seem to be critical.

Appropriate drills for all of these procedures include oral and written transformations from sentences with the direct object to sentences with the noun omitted. However, personalized questions which provide for real communication are most effective.

Finally, the last phase concentrates on the first- and second-person forms. Since there are no nouns which serve as sources for all the pronouns here, the most appropriate device for teaching them and providing practice is a question and answer technique.

It is instructive at this point to contrast this approach with the traditional one presented in our texts. They usually begin by introducing seven new forms (or eight if we count os) as elements unrelated to what the students already know. Further, their function is explained first in terms of noun replacement ("pronominalization") with examples in which the pronoun is required to precede the verb. This itself is distracting in its novelty. Thus, the students have nine or ten new ideas to learn all at once. In this situation, it is

no wonder that students remain confused and take such a long time to master all of the details.

The new procedure outlined here, however, limits the first exposure to only two or three items: noun omission, change el to lo, and the minor detail of hooking the left-over article to the infinitive. Three pronoun forms are "learned" with no effort. In addition, the basic principle of noun omission applies to several other features of Spanish grammar ("nominalized" adjectives, possessives and demonstratives, and "relative pronouns"). Applying the same principle again effectively redues the amount of time we must spend to teach them. Finally, this new approach, by distributing the facts to be learned in smaller and more manageable steps, results in more efficient and satisfying learning.